
UNIT 12 ANCIENT GREECE

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12.1 INTRODUCTION

While the Achaemenids were building a vast empire which extended in the west to the shores of the Aegean Sea and included many Greek settlements of Anatolia, in Greece itself a brilliant civilization was taking shape. The pattern of development of ancient Greece represents an exception during the age of empires. Greece was unique in that it was the centre of a great civilization but did not develop into an empire or even a territorially large political state. The historical experience of Greece therefore needs to be examined from the point of view of its distinctiveness.

Circa 500 BC marks the beginning of the classical age of Greece, the most glorious phase of ancient Greek civilization. The classical age lasted from c. 500 BC to the Macedonian conquest of the Greek states in 338 BC. The classical age represented the culmination of a long historical process during which the foundations of Greek civilization were laid. By about 2000 BC the large island of Crete in Greece had emerged as the centre of the first bronze age civilization in Europe. This was the Minoan civilization which flourished between 2000 and 1400 BC.

In our discussion in this Unit first we will familiarise you with the geographical spread of the Greek Civilization. This would be followed by a chronological development of Greek civilization. This has been divided into two major sections i.e. i) Early Greek Civilization and ii) Archaic and Classical Period. The former has three main epochs the Minoan Civilization, the Mycenaean Civilization and the Dark Age. The latter has been discussed together in one section. In this section we have taken note of specific developments and features of whole period. The most important feature of the period is conflict of landed

aristocracy with peasants, and transition to democracy. Formation of Delian league and emergence of Deme are other important events. In the end a brief account of the development of philosophical thought in Greece would be provided.

12.2 GEORAPHICAL FEATURES

Before we proceed to examine the evolution of Greek civilization it would be useful to outline the geographical features of Greece. It should be noted that when we speak of ancient Greece we are referring to an area that was much larger than the present-day state of Greece. The Greek world in antiquity encompassed western Anatolia, Thrace, the islands of the Aegean Sea, Crete, Cyprus, mainland Greece, southern Italy and Sicily.

Mainland Greece is an irregularly shaped peninsula in south-eastern Europe, enclosed by the Ionian Sea in the west, the Aegean Sea in the east and the Mediterranean Sea in the south. The southern part of the peninsula is in the shape of a palm which extends into the Mediterranean. This is known as the peloponnese. The Peloponnese is almost an island, separated from the rest of the mainland by the Gulf of Corinth. A thin strip of land connects the north-eastern corner of the Peloponnese with the mainland. The prominent ancient city of Corinth is located at the junction of the Peloponnese and continental Greece. Beyond the narrow strip of land which forms the bridge between the Peloponnese and the mainland lies the region of Attica in the east. Attica is bound by the Aegean Sea on all sides. Athens is situated in Attica. To the north-west of Attica is the area called Boeotia. Thebes was the dominant city of Boeotia. Further north, along the Aegean coast, is the region of Thessaly. Moving in a clockwise direction from Thessaly we come to Macedonia and Thrace. Macedonia was the home of Alexander the Great. Thrace, part of which now constitutes the European zone of Turkey, is the easternmost part of southern Europe. It is separated from Asia by the Sea of Marmara. Crossing the Sea of Marmara brings one to western Anatolia. Western Anatolia and the Greek Peninsula lie on either side of the Aegean Sea.

The Aegean Sea was the geographical nucleus of the ancient Greek world. In the Aegean Sea itself there are a large number of islands of varying sizes. Off the west coast of Anatolia are some large islands such as Lemnos, Lesbos, Chios, Samos and Rhodes. Then there is a group of islands concentrated in the southern Aegean. The islands of this group are collectively called the Cyclades. The large rectangular island of Crete is situated south of the Peloponnese and the Cyclades. It may be mentioned here that Greek settlers had also colonized some areas of southern Italy and Sicily. These settlers are collectively referred to as Western Greeks.

12.3 THE EARLY GREEK CIVILIZATIONS

The early Greek Civilizations would be discussed in three parts the Minoan Civilization, Mycenaean Civilization and the Dark Age.

12.3.1 The Minoan Civilization

In deciding the chronology of ancient Greece the Minoan Civilization can be considered as the first bronze age civilization of the region. The civilization

emerged towards the end of third millennium BC and flourished till around 1400 BC. The civilization came to light in the early 20th century through the efforts of Sir Arthus Evans who conducted the diggings in the region. This was named after the legendary king Minos of the Crete mythology. The ruins are available in a number of towns the most prominent being Knossos, Phaistos and Mallia. It seems that palaces were the most prominent structures in these centres. Besides being centres of political authority the palaces were also centres of economic activity.

Sheep rearing and wool production were main produce of rural economy. Wheat, grapes and olives were main agricultural products. The goods were brought from rural areas to the cities for redistribution and trade. It seems that the Minoans had trading links with Egypt, Anatolia, the Lebanese Coast, Cyprus and Aegean through the sea routes. The Minoans had developed writing. The script remains undeciphered. It has been named Linear 'A'. It seems to have been used for trade and exchange.

The Minoan civilization of Crete came to an end around 1400 BC. Natural calamities, triggered by a major volcanic eruption in the southern Aegean, might have caused its sudden collapse. Eventually Crete was overwhelmed by colonizers from mainland Greece who, while they borrowed some aspects of Minoan civilization, developed a new bronze age civilization—the Mycenaean civilization.

12.3.2 The Mycenaean Civilization

Whereas Crete was the centre of the Minoan civilization, the Mycenaean civilization was a product of mainland Greece. This civilization, which flourished between c. 1600 and 1200 BC, came to light as a result of the pioneering excavations of Heinrich Schliemann. The civilization is named after the site of Mycenae (Mykenai) situated in the north-western corner of the Peloponnese. Other major Mycenaean sites are Tiryns, Pylos, Thebes, Orchomenos and Knossos.

When we speak of the Mycenaeans we are not referring to a single political entity but several distinct settlements which formed separate states. These states were ruled by warrior chiefs. The chiefs usually bore the royal title wanax (oranax) and ruled over their territories from fortified palace complexes which dominated the Mycenaean urban centres. A powerful warrior aristocracy and an elaborate bureaucracy constituted the ruling elite. The fortified palace complexes exercised extensive control over the respective economies of the Mycenaean states through centralized bureaucratic structures. This bureaucracy regulated virtually every aspect of the economy. The Mycenaeans had an extensive foreign trade. Oil, pottery and textiles were their main exports. They imported gold, copper and tin. Society was highly stratified with the ruling elite having access to a large surplus. The Mycenaean chiefs were buried in large beehive shaped tombs (*tholoi*) or in large chamber tombs. The resources that would have to be mobilized for constructing these tombs, as well as the fine craftsmanship of the objects found in them, leave us in no doubt as to the wealth possessed by many of the Mycenaean chiefs/kings.

The Mycenaeans have left behind abundant written records which provide us with details about the role played by the palaces in the economy. The

Mycenaeans evolved a script which is referred to as the Linear B script. The Linear B script was deciphered in 1952 by Michael Ventris. Ventris found that the language of the script was an early version of the Greek language. The Mycenaeans were among the earliest Greek-speaking people to settle in the peninsula. The Greeks were a branch of the Indo-European people and their migrations must be viewed in the context of the tribal movements of the third millennium BC which we have discussed in Unit 10. The language of the Mycenaeans was somewhat different from that spoken by later Greek settlers and is labelled by scholars as 'proto-Greek'. This is the language of the Linear B script.

The Linear B records that have survived are mainly in the form of clay tablets. They are invariably inventories or accounts and contain no references to political history or religious practices. They were obviously compiled by palace officials to keep track of the surprisingly large number of transactions that the palace had to undertake in order to regulate a wide range of economic activities. The fact that the script exhibits a great deal of uniformity throughout the Mycenaean area shows that the bureaucracy, or at least the professional scribes, were drawn from a close-knit group with links extending over several parts of the peninsula.

The Mycenaean civilization lasted till c. 1200 BC. Another round of tribal migrations coincided with the simultaneous collapse of bronze age civilizations in the eastern Mediterranean by 1200 BC. In the traditional periodization of ancient Greek history the four centuries from 1200 to 800 BC are referred to as the Dark Age. Mycenaean cities went into decline, the Linear B script disappeared and trade was disrupted. It was traditionally believed that Dorian invasions (Dorians were a Greek-speaking tribe which settled in the southern Peloponnese where Sparta is located) were responsible for the destruction of the Mycenaean civilization, although this picture has now been completely revised. Source material for this period is rather scanty. Hence the use of the term 'Dark Age' for this period.

12.3.3 The Dark Age

The Dark Age lasted for nearly four centuries, coming to an end in c. 800 BC. The significance of this date is that around this time two great Greek epics, *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were written. Their composition is attributed to a poet by the name of Homer. These epics mark a turning point in Greek history. With *Iliad* and *Odyssey* written records are once again available for ancient Greece after a long gap. Apart from their great literary merit, these epics are a very rich historical source. The two works are part of the tradition of epic poetry. The main theme of *Iliad* is the war of a coalition of Greek states against the state of Troy (the ruins of ancient Troy are located in the northwestern corner of Anatolia). According to the story narrated in the epic this war, known as the Trojan war, lasted for ten years. *Odyssey* recounts the adventures encountered by Odysseus, one of the heroes of the war, on his homeward journey after the conclusion of the campaign. The epics give us some idea about various aspects of contemporary religion, mythology, beliefs, food habits and dress.

Scholars earlier held the view that *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were inspired by events which had taken place in the Mycenaean age and spoke about that period. There can be no doubt that some of the stories in these epics are derived from the Mycenaean era. They show an awareness of an earlier civilization in which

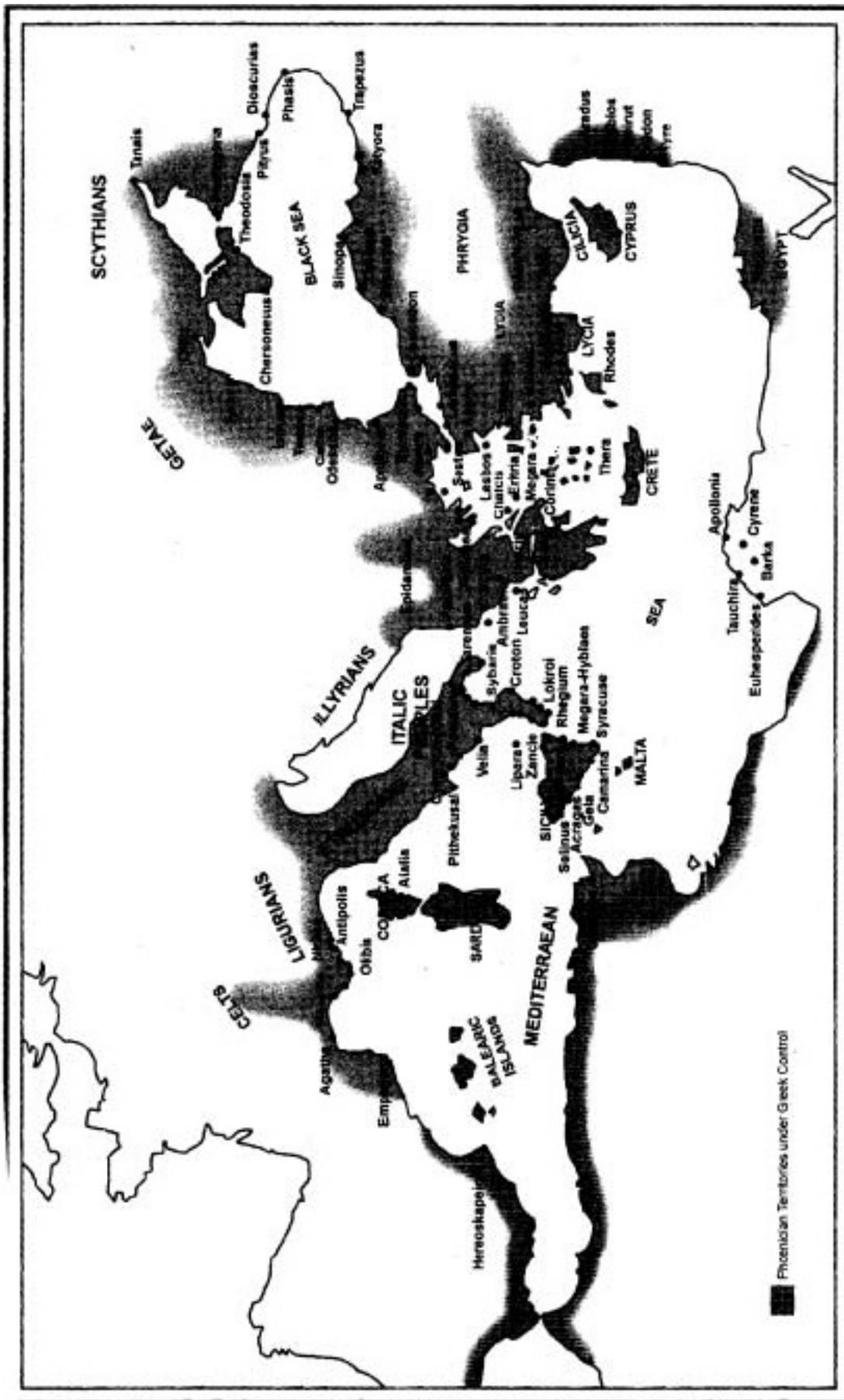
great heroes, kings and warriors lived. It was therefore thought that the Homeric epics were essentially a portrayal of Mycenaean society. The reinterpretation of these poems, particularly in the light of the more exhaustive archaeological evidence, has allowed scholars to view *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as compositions of the Dark Age. The actual details of everyday life contained in them relate to the closing phase of the Dark Age and these indicate a break with the Mycenaean social formation.

Historians now divide the Dark Age into two sub-periods: i) 1200 to 1050 BC and ii) 1050 to 800 BC. In the first sub-period Mycenaean urban centres declined and there are signs of extensive depopulation. The archaeological evidence reveals a sharp decline in population between 1300 and 1100 BC. Settlements are fewer and are smaller in size. Tribal migrations, at times violent, were also taking place in this period. The Mycenaean economy based on centralized regulation by the palace bureaucracy collapsed around 1200 BC. With it written records in the Linear B script also disappeared. Long distance trade was disrupted making it difficult to procure copper and tin for producing bronze objects. The reasons for this kind of widespread disintegration are still not clear and continue to be debated by scholars.

A little before 1000 BC a new economy and social structure began to emerge in Greece. By this time tribal migrations had resulted in Greek speaking people occupying the entire peninsula. Simultaneously the Aegean islands and the western coast of Anatolia were incorporated in the Greek linguistic zone. Southern Italy was also in the process of being colonized. The major Greek dialects evolved in this period. There were three major dialects: Ionic, which included the subdialect Attic spoken in Athens; Doric; and Aeolic. A significant feature of this period was the introduction and dissemination of iron technology from c. 1000 BC onwards. This period marks the transition to the iron age. The origins of iron technology remain obscure. However the archaeological evidence that has accumulated over the years indicates that Anatolia and northern Mesopotamia pioneered the use of this metal. It is not difficult to explain the rapid advance of iron in Greece once the technology became available. The people of the area had to depend wholly on imports for their supplies of copper and tin. The decline of eastern Mediterranean trade after 1200 BC created problems for Greek metallurgy because the supply of copper and tin could not be maintained. The introduction of iron offered a viable alternative. Since Greece had adequate deposits of iron ore the Greek states with their limited resources would have preferred the use of this metal rather than exchange their meagre surpluses for imported copper and tin. Iron technology became one of the factors that contributed to the recovery which took place in the period between 1050 and 800 BC.

The end of the Dark Age saw the revival of writing in Greece. We have seen that the Linear B script had already disappeared with the collapse of Mycenaean civilization. When the Greeks began using a script towards the end of the Dark Age it was a new script. This script was borrowed from the Phoenicians. The Phoenicians had evolved a script (c. 1500 BC) which was based on the phonetic principle. The symbols in this script stood for different sounds, i.e. it was an alphabetic script. The Greeks adopted the Phoenician script and modified it to suit their language. The Homeric epics were written in the new Greek alphabet.

Greek society as reflected in the Homeric epics was very different from that of



Map-2

the Mycenaean period. It was simpler, largely self-sufficient with little trade or exchange, and did not have powerful kings. In the latter half of the Dark Age the Greeks were divided into a large number of petty-states. These states were ruled by kings or chiefs with limited authority. They had to share political power with other members of the elite. In many states, such as Athens, monarchical rule had come to an end by the beginning of the Archaic Period and was replaced by oligarchical political structures.

12.4 THE ARCHAIC AND CLASSICAL PERIOD

The period following the Dark Age is referred to as the Archaic period (c. 800 – 500 BC). The foundations of classical Greek Civilization were laid in this period. The period from 500 BC to 338 BC is generally referred as the classical age of Greece. Some prominent changes take place in archaic and classical period and need specific discussion. However, the division into these two periods is not always very sharp and there is lot of overlapping and continuity in various aspects of society, economy and culture. In view of this we would like to discuss it as one broad period of ancient Greece. The developments and institutions of the whole period would be analysed in this section. Wherever the features are clearly demarcated and can be distinctly confined to either of the periods it would be mentioned during the course of our discussion.

12.4.1 Conflict of Landed Aristocracy and Peasantry: Reforms Start

The Archaic Period (c. 800 – 500 BC) witnessed an intense conflict between the landed aristocracy and the peasantry throughout Greece. The origins of this struggle may be traced to the latter half of the Dark Age when historical changes had placed landowning aristocrats in a strong position. Between c. 800 and 600 BC the landed aristocracy consolidated its hold over land and the political structures of the Greek states. This led to the impoverishment of the small landholders. In their desperation the small landholders put up a tough fight against the aristocracy. The constant upheavals caused by this struggle reached a point of crisis by c. 600 BC. Sections of the aristocracy realized that unless some way was found out of the crisis their own prosperity would be threatened. Consequently they were forced to initiate reforms which incorporated concessions to the peasants.

We have some information on the reforms undertaken at Athens. The evidence from Athens is supplemented by references to other states and shows that similar historical developments were taking place in large parts of Greece. In 594 BC the Athenians resorted to the solution of nominating an arbitrator, named Solon, to carry out reforms. On the basis of a consensus Solon was vested with wide-ranging powers for a specified duration. The most radical reform of Solon was the abolition of debt bondage. This had emerged as one of the most serious problems faced by the peasantry. Impoverished peasants, who often had meagre holdings located in difficult terrain such as hillsides, had to take loans from wealthy landowners. When poor peasants failed to repay their debts they were forced into bondage. Laws pertaining to repayment of loans had stringent provisions which required a person who was unable to pay back a loan to accept bondage to the creditor. Peasants were thus simultaneously being

deprived of their land and were being reduced to the status of slaves. The major demands of the peasantry were redistribution of land and abolition of debt bondage. The abolition of debt bondage under Solon implied that henceforth Athenian free peasants could not be enslaved if they failed to repay their loans. The existing debt of the peasants was cancelled.

Nevertheless, Solon did not carry out redistribution of land. He did, however, introduce changes in the political system which gave ordinary Athenians the right to participate in government. We will discuss these later in the context of the evolution of Greek democracy. The abolition of debt bondage prevented the enslavement of the impoverished peasants, but in the absence of land reforms the aristocracy continued to possess a disproportionately large share of cultivable land. After 594 BC there was a shortage of rural labour. The big landowners, who required labour to cultivate their large holdings, solved this problem by increasingly employing slaves brought from outside.

Not surprisingly there were fresh upheavals in Athens within a few decades of Solon's reforms. Similar conditions prevailed in other states where incomplete reforms or no reforms had taken place. In these disturbed conditions some political leaders carried out a series of coups and assumed dictatorial powers in their respective states. This development completely altered the nature of governance in a large number of Greek states. The events at Athens typify the process. Peisistratus was the person responsible for the coup at Athens. He first attempted to seize power in 561, but was unsuccessful and had to flee from the city. He eventually managed to succeed in 545 BC. Peisistratus installed himself as supreme ruler of the city, setting aside existing constitutional arrangements and defying oligarchical institutions.

What was emerging was a new form of government for which contemporaries used the term 'tyranny'. Rulers like Peisistratus who had usurped power in this manner were called 'tyrants'. A significant aspect of Greek tyranny was that it had considerable popular support, mainly from among the impoverished peasantry and from groups which had accumulated wealth through trade but had traditionally no access to political power. When Peisistratus seized power he took over public wastelands that had been occupied by the aristocracy and distributed these among the small or dispossessed peasants. He also confiscated the property of some of the rich landowners who had gone into exile following the establishment of tyranny and gave these to needy farmers. The policies pursued by Peisistratus had a twofold outcome. First, the position of the peasantry was stabilized. Second, the monopoly of the entrenched landed aristocracy over the political structure was broken. Peisistratus died in 527 BC. He was succeeded by his son Hippias.

This appeared to be an attempt to transform tyranny into dynastic rule and caused much resentment among the people. In any case, the historical relevance of tyranny was now over. In 510 BC Hippias was overthrown. This date marks the beginning of classical democracy at Greece.

12.4.2 Transition to Democracy

In the Classical Period, and subsequently, the Greeks referred to the age of tyranny with intense dislike. Yet it should be borne in mind that tyranny speeded up the transition from oligarchical rule to democracy. The tyrants helped to

undermine the institutions through which the aristocracy has so far exercised political power. This phenomenon was not confined to Athens alone. At Corinth the tyrant Periander came to power c. 600 BC. A little before Periander, Cypselus had overthrown the Bacchidae--the ruling aristocratic group at Corinth. We also have information about other tyrants. Polycrates became tyrant of Samos c. 545 BC and Lygdamis seized power at Naxos around the same time.

The tyrants were instrumental in doing away with the traditional hereditary basis of political power. The Greek aristocracies were close-knit hereditary elites. They enjoyed power not merely because of their wealth but more significantly by virtue of their birth. The aristocratic families automatically held all executive, judicial, and military positions. That is why we refer to the political structures of the Greek states during the Archaic Period as being oligarchical in nature. The tyrants struck at the roots of this oligarchical control, thereby creating conditions for the transition to democracy. During the course of the Archaic Period a number of Greek states evolved into democracies. Some of the earliest democracies that we have information about were those of Chios and Megara where democratic institutions had come into existence around c. 600 BC.

Even though the degree of democratization varied from state to state, it would not be incorrect to say that in Greece by the beginning of the Classical Period common people participated in the political process to a much greater degree than what we find in other contemporary societies. This was a fundamentally new system of government, especially for societies with class differentiation. *Polis* was the term most frequently used to denote those political entities in ancient Greece which had some aspects of democratic functioning. The forms of government of the various *polis* (plural *poleis*) ranged from purely oligarchical on the one hand, to the mature democracy of Athens on the other. In between stood the states, probably the majority, with elements of oligarchy combined in varying proportions. The states about which we have information do not show any homogeneity in the structure of the *polis*. Athens and Sparta had emerged as the two leading *poleis* in Greece by the beginning of the Classical Period. The historical evidence is also quite uneven. While we have many details about Athens, and to a lesser extent Sparta, contemporary sources tell us very little about important democracies such as Corinth and Syracuse.

The *polis* was territorially a small political entity. The size of the population was also relatively small. Given the constraints of ancient society, democracy would not have been functional had the *polis* been large either territorially or in terms of its inhabitants. This point needs to be emphasized because Greek democracy was a direct democracy. In modern democracy the people choose their representatives who then legislate and govern on their behalf. In ancient Greece, democracy implied participation by all the citizens in the basic organ of the democratic system, namely the assembly.

The concept of citizenship was a restricted one. Only the indigenous, native, residents of a *polis* (and their descendants) were recognized as citizens. Citizenship rights did not extend to all inhabitants, not even all the free inhabitants. Firstly, women were excluded. Only male adults enjoyed the privilege of being citizens in the political sense. Secondly, all those who were not original residents of the *polis*, or were considered outsiders for some reason

or the other (e.g. if they were a conquered community and had been deprived of their political rights), did not form part of the citizen body. In Sparta the free non-citizens were called perioikoi; at Athens they were known as metics (*metoikoi*). Many of the traders settled at Athens were metics. Of course slaves had no rights whatsoever.

One should add here that only citizens could own land. There was also a close link between citizenship rights and military service. The Greek states did not maintain standing armies of professional soldiers. To a large extent this was because they lacked the resources for financing such an army. All free adult males of the community were expected to render military service. In other words, the citizens were simultaneously soldiers. Citizens had to equip themselves with their fighting gear out of their own resources, something that was possible only if they possessed some land. The backbone of the Greek armies was the hoplite infantry (foot-soldiers). The overwhelming majority of the hoplites were small and middle farmers. We could say that Greek armies were essentially armies of peasant-citizens.

The citizens of the Greek *polis* could exercise their right to participate and vote in the assembly, which was the basic right of citizenship, by personally attending the meetings of the assembly. One had to actually go to the meetings of the assembly, usually held in some open space in the city-centre, in order to exercise this right. Such a conception of democracy would have been unworkable if the respective Greek states possessed a big area or a large population. The actual task of governance was carried out through a smaller body, the council. With the decline of monarchy, real power had passed into the hands of oligarchical councils dominated by the hereditary landed elite.

Given its nature and large size the assembly could not meet very frequently. Even when it met it could only debate and vote on few issues. This gave the council wide ranging authority for intervening in the functioning of the assembly. Usually the council convened the assembly (unless dates were traditionally fixed), prepared its agenda, and guided its sessions. To some extent this was intended to be a check on the assembly. The council was a very powerful body in most states and though in many cases its membership was monopolized by the landed aristocracy yet at least at Athens it had become genuinely representative by c. 500 BC.

Athens has a special significance in any discussion on Greek democracy due to the scope of its accomplishment. Moreover, our knowledge about the political structure of Athens is more extensive than that of other states. It may be stated at the outset that in terms of the development of its democratic structure Athens was an exception rather than the rule in ancient Greece. We have already stated that Solon made changes in the political system which gave ordinary Athenians the right to participate in the government. His reforms (594 BC) represent an important stage in the evolution of Athenian democracy. Solon revived the Athenian assembly which had not met for a long time and had ceased to function. He simultaneously constituted a new Athenian council called the *boule*. This council had four hundred members and it superseded the old oligarchical council. The old Athenian council, called Aeropagus, was an organ of the aristocracy. Membership of the latter body was traditionally monopolized by a hereditary elite known as the 'Eupatridae'. The Aeropagus was not abolished, but its functions were curtailed till eventually it ceased to play an

important role. The *boule* now became the main centre of political power. Membership of the *boule* was based on property qualifications and not on hereditary right, which in itself was an innovation.

Solon divided the Athenian citizens into four classes. The property or wealth possessed by a citizen determined the class in which he was placed. Right at the top were the *pentacosiomedimni*, who possessed land which yielded at least 500 *medimnoi* (a unit for measuring the quantity of grain) of wheat, or its equivalent value in wine or oil. Next were the citizens whose land yielded at least 300 *medimnoi* (*hippeis*). The third category was that of owners of land yielding at least 200 *medimnoi*. Those belonging to this class were called the *zeugitai*. The *zeugitai* were small and middle peasants who also constituted the main strength of the Athenian hoplite infantry and could not therefore be easily ignored. Right at the bottom were the *thetes* who had property yielding less than 200 *medimnoi*. The *thetes* were the poor peasantry. We can see that political participation was intimately tied up with landownership and the amount of land owned by a citizen determined his place within the political structure.

Membership of the *boule* was open only to the first three classes. The impoverished sections, i.e. the *thetes* were excluded from the council. In other words the council was essentially a body of the rich and middle peasantry. Qualifications for public offices corresponded to the four-fold class division. The first two classes held the principal political and military offices. The *zeugitai* held minor offices. The *thetes* only had the right to participate in the meetings of the assembly.

After the overthrow of Hippias in 510 BC the political structure was further reformed. The crucial democratic reforms at the beginning of the classical period are attributed to Cleisthenes, who for some years was the most important political figure at Athens following the end of tyranny. A brief outline of some of the key political events in Greece during the Classical Period might be useful for a better understanding of the evolution of the political structure of Athens in this era.

12.4.3 Conflict with Persia: Formation of Delian League

Greek history in the latter half of the sixth century BC has to be viewed against the backdrop of the westward expansion of the Persian empire. We have already discussed this in detail in Unit 11. Persian expansion into western Anatolia, the Aegean and mainland Greece coincided with the phase of tyranny and the beginning of the Classical period at Athens. Between c. 500 and 480 BC the states of the Greek peninsula were locked in a fierce contest with the Achaemenids. Sparta was at this time the foremost military power on land. Athens was the main naval power, though it also had a fairly strong army. The Athenians had built a strong navy which played a leading role in the conflict with Persia. Themistocles was the architect of Athenian naval strength. The Greeks pooled together their resources under the leadership of Athens and Sparta in order to resist the Persian onslaught (for details of Persian campaigns in Greece refer to Unit 11).

Whereas the decisive battles of Salamis (480 BC) and Plataea (479 BC) had halted the Persian advance into the Aegean Sea, the threat of further Persian campaigns still remained. The Greek states were aware of the need to pool

together resources on a long-term basis to thwart further invasions. No state had the capacity to fight the Persians entirely on its own. On the Peloponnese there was a strong military alliance under the leadership of Sparta. With this arrangement the Peloponnesians were better placed to defend themselves. The problem was much more serious for the Aegean islands and the coastal states since they had no such mechanism. It was as a solution to this problem that Athens, after Salamis and Plataea, took the initiative to form a confederation of states under its own leadership (487 BC). This confederacy has come to be known as the Delian League. The Delian League derived its name from the island of Delos where the common treasury of the confederacy was located. The primary objective of forming this confederacy was to maintain a strong navy in the Aegean Sea. The members of the Delian League made regular contributions for this purpose.

Once the Persian threat receded, the Athenians transformed the character of the League. They used their dominant position within the League to utilize its resources for promoting its own interests. From a voluntary confederation the Delian League gradually became an empire ruled by the Athenians. The contributions to the League now became enforced tribute payable to Athens. The wealth that the empire, and control over the Aegean Sea, brought to Athens was crucial for sustaining its democratic institutions in the Classical Period and keeping discontent in check.

Having established its hegemony over the Aegean, Athens tried to expand its empire by including the Peloponnese in it. This brought it into conflict with Sparta. A prolonged military contest between the two states ensued. This is known as the Peloponnesian War which lasted from 431 to 404 BC. By 404 BC Athens had been defeated by Sparta and its navy was destroyed. For several decades after that Sparta remained the major Greek power, though it was subsequently challenged by Thebes. The conflicts among the Greek states after the Peloponnesian War gave the Persians an opportunity to interfere in their affairs, and thus to become politically dominant in Greece.

12.4.4 Democratic Political Structure: Emergence of Deme

The hundred years between the overthrow of Hippias and the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian war witnessed the growth of a highly evolved democratic political structure at Athens. This structure owed a lot to the initiatives of Cleisthenes (c. 507 BC). Athenian citizens had been traditionally divided into four Ionian tribes. These traced their descent from the tribes or clans which had originally settled in Attica. Following the political reforms of Solon, each tribe sent one hundred members to the *boule*. Cleisthenes did away with the kinship principle for grouping the citizens, and replaced it with ten residential tribes or *phylai*. These new *phylai* were based on a radically new concept. The *phyle* to which a citizen belonged was determined by the place where he resided and not by his kinship ties.

The primary unit of the democratic structure established by Cleisthenes was the 'deme'. Every citizen was first and foremost a member of a particular deme. The deme was the smallest geographical unit into which the *polis* of Athens was divided for political purposes. There were 139 demes in all. The demes were responsible for maintaining registers of citizens. They had their own local elected governments, including an assembly and officials. The local

governments were headed by the *demarchos*. Cleisthenes reformed the *boule* as well. The strength of the council was raised from four hundred to five hundred members. Fifty members were selected from each of the ten *phylai*. Membership of the *boule* was thrown open to all citizens, including *thetes*. Any citizen over the age of thirty was eligible for membership of the *boule*. The main executive and military officials of the *polis* were the *archons*. Ever since monarchy had come to an end in Athens the *archons* had been the chief executive and military officers. Throughout the Archaic Period the aristocracy had monopolized these posts. During the Classical Period the archonship was gradually made an elective post and it became possible for ordinary citizens to hold these positions. Despite its limitations, Athenian democracy was an outstanding achievement.

12.4.5 Slave Labour

A distinctive feature of ancient Greek civilization was the widespread use of slave labour in various sectors of the economy. There is evidence of the presence of large numbers of slaves in other ancient civilizations, such as those of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia and the Hittites. The Mesopotamian and Hittite law codes indicate that institutionalized slavery existed in these civilizations. However the scale of slavery was qualitatively different in ancient Greece. Here for the first time in history slave labour was used extensively for production. The initial pool of slaves was formed of prisoners of war. This source was supplemented from within the community by those who were enslaved due to their inability to pay loans (debt bondage). Nevertheless wars brought captive slaves in much larger numbers. The earliest slaves in Greece, as in other societies, were women. Women slaves formed a significant portion of the workforce in Mycenaean palaces. For example, the palace at Pylos had at least 550 women engaged in textile production. In the Linear B tablets the term used for slaves is *doeri*. The Homeric epics also contain numerous references to women being enslaved during wars.

By the Archaic and Classical Periods slaves were to be found in every sector of production, especially in mining, handicrafts and agriculture. Some historians are of the view that the role of slavery in Greek agriculture has been exaggerated and that the agrarian economy depended mainly on the peasantry and free labour.

At the end of the Dark Age Sparta was already using slave labour on a scale that was unprecedented. Sparta had annexed the territory of Messenia located in the southern Peloponnese and had converted the entire population of this area into slaves. The Spartans introduced a peculiar form of slavery called 'helotry'. Helots were slaves who were owned collectively by the entire Spartan community. Agricultural land in Messenia was divided into holdings called *kleroi* and allotted to Spartan citizens. These holdings, alongwith the land already possessed by the Spartans, were cultivated with the labour of helots. Since there was considerable social differentiation in Sparta, the *kleroi* were not distributed equitably. The aristocracy got a much bigger share.

The distribution of helots was regulated by the state. The state assigned a certain number of slaves to each family depending upon its requirements for labour. **The difference between helotry and other types of slavery was that helots were not owned individually.** Moreover, they were allowed to maintain family ties. The children born to the helots had the same status as their parents.

This meant that Sparta was able to meet its requirements of slave labour from among the Messenians for several generations. It should not be assumed that helotry was a more humane form of slavery as some scholars have suggested. Helotry was a more primitive form of slavery which in turn reflected the relative backwardness of Spartan economy. Private property was not fully developed in Sparta and there were many tribal survivals in its social organization. Helotry was prevalent in other Greek states as well, as for instance in Thessaly, Crete and Argos. In other parts of Greece privately owned slaves increasingly became a typical feature of Greek society and economy. Several terms were used to describe such slaves, the most common being *doulos*.

In Athens slaves were mostly privately owned. These slaves were regarded as property and bought and sold in the market as commodities. The prosperity of Athens during the Classical Period rested on the expansion of slave labour. Historians have offered figures for Athenian slaves during the fifth century BC ranging from 60,000 to 110,000. It has been estimated that of these, nearly 20,000 to 30,000 worked in the Athenian silver mines. Besides agriculture and mining, slaves dominated handicraft production and were engaged in various kinds of domestic and menial work. It is necessary to emphasize that while there was slave labour in every sector of the economy, free labour was also to be found in all types of production (see also the discussion on Roman slavery in Unit 13).

12.4.6 Development of Philosophical Thought

The ancient Greece may be credited with a very rich intellectual contribution. Due to constraints of space it would not be possible for us to go into detailed analysis of the Greek philosophical tradition. We intend to familiarise you with some basic factual information on the philosophical thought that developed in Greece. Their intellectual tradition touched many aspects of human society and knowledge. History, Philosophy, Mathematics and Medicine were some of the main areas influenced by the ideas of the Greek thinkers. The development of democratic traditions in Greece helped in creating an environment conducive to intellectual discourse and growth.

The Ionian School of thought (c. 600 BC) was one of the earliest philosophic tradition. Thales, Anaximandes and Anazemenes were the main proponents of this school. They were mainly concerned with the basic elements of nature (air, water earth) and their driving force. Pythagoras, an outstanding thinker believed in the transmigration of the soul and laid emphasis on achieving harmony for the soul. He was involved with the study of nature, musical scale and mathematics. However, he is most famous for his geometrical theorem which states that, in a right angled triangle, the square of the length of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides. Hippocrates was one of the outstanding thinker of the classical period in the area of medicine. He gave medicine a scientific foundation replacing magical cures. He believed in treating diseases by diagnosing on the basis of examining the symptoms scientifically.

Herodotus (c.484 – 425) is called ‘the father of history’ for giving it a distinct identity as a branch of knowledge. History which was treated as a mix of facts, fiction, myths, legends, fables and anecdotes was given a new meaning based on authentic facts and their verification. He wrote detailed accounts of Persian wars. He widely travelled and gathered information about various

countries. He always verified and evaluated his information before writing his accounts.

Socrates, Plato and Aristotle are considered as the most towering thinkers of the classical Greek Philosophy. Socrates (469 - 399 BC) is credited with a shift from thinking about nature to thinking about the nature of human existence. The refinement of various categories of philosophy was his major contribution. His student Plato (427 – 347 B.C.) established an academy at Athens and taught philosophy. He is regarded as an ‘idealist’. He argued that things have no independent existence outside our minds and believed that experience is unreal, only ideas are real. He influenced later Arab and Western thought in a big way. Plato’s disciple Aristotle (384 – 322 B.C) held ideas which were different from those of his teacher. He disagreed with Plato’s view that experience was unnecessary to understand reality. He was a keen student of Science and studied plants and animals. Both Plato and Aristotle were opposed to the idea of involving masses in all decision making processes. They held the view that people have a limited role to play in the government. This was, to some extent, a reflection of the thinking of the elite in Athens who believed in curtailing democratic rights.

12.4.7 The End of the Classical Period

The Classical Period came to an end in 338 BC when the Macedonians subjugated the *poleis* of the Greek peninsula and the Aegean Sea. Macedonia, just as other regions located north of mainland Greece, had been a relatively backward area. Using improved military techniques and the resources of the Macedonian plains, king Philip II (382-336 BC) created an empire which eventually included the Greek states of the peninsula and the Aegean. In 338 BC Philip defeated the Greek city-states at Chaeronea and placed them under Macedonian rule. With the Macedonian conquest the era of the *polis* came to an end. As a political entity the *polis* ceased to exist after 338 BC. Philip II was succeeded in 336 BC by his son Alexander the Great who founded a vast empire.

Alexander launched a massive expansionist programme following his accession. His primary aim was to destroy Persian power in West Asia so as to consolidate Macedonian rule over the entire region. By 330 BC Alexander had conquered the Persian empire after defeating the last of the Achaemenid emperors (Darius III). His subsequent campaigns brought him to the banks of the Indus. Alexander died at Babylon in 323 BC. The eastward expansion of the Macedonian empire under Alexander had made Anatolia, Syria, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Iran, Afghanistan and some parts of Central Asia and northwest India, Macedonian-ruled territories. Following the death of Alexander some of the outlying regions of the empire were lost but the greater part of Alexander’s territories remained under Macedonian control.

Alexander had left no heir to his vast empire and had made no arrangements for appointing a successor. A bitter power struggle among his leading officials and military commanders (referred to as the ‘Diadochi’ or successors) broke out after his death. This struggle lasted almost till 275 BC. The empire was eventually partitioned among three of the Diadochi—Seleucus, Ptolemy and Antigonus. The dynasties of these successors ruled over their respective portions of the empire: the Seleucids in Iran, Mesopotamia and Syria; the Ptolemies in Egypt; and the Antigonids in Macedonia.

The period from the death of Alexander and the founding of the Seleucid, Ptolemaic and Antigonid empires down to the time when Rome became the supreme power in the eastern Mediterranean (c. 300 to 30 BC) is referred to as the Hellenistic age. The successor states which came into existence as a result of the division of Alexander's empire are called Hellenistic kingdoms. The Hellenistic kingdoms were governed by a Macedonian/Greek ruling elite and Greek became the official language of Iran, West Asia, Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean. Greek also became the chief language of intellectual discourse in this area. The Hellenistic kingdoms created conditions for disseminating the accomplishments of classical Greek civilization over a large part of West Asia and in Egypt. Since the Asian and north African territories of the Hellenistic kingdoms were centres of grand ancient civilizations, the Greek ruling classes of these empires adopted several customs of their subjects. This gave rise to a dynamic cultural tradition which may be conveniently labelled as Hellenistic civilization.

12.5 SUMMARY

The Greece as we mentioned earlier is a unique case in the age of empires as it was a centre of great civilization but did not develop into an empire. In this unit we tried to give an overview of around 2000 years of ancient Greece. It is not possible to give details of all aspects of such a great civilization in one Unit. We have, therefore, confined our discussion to some of the salient features of Greek Civilization. In the early phase which is roughly upto c.800 BC we studied the development of Minoan, Mycenaean and Dark Ages.

The Archaic and classical periods witnessed some significant social and political developments. Conflict of peasantry and landed aristocracy and subsequent transition to Greek democracy were important changes. The period between 500 BC and 480 BC witnessed regular conflict with Persian empire. As a result attempts were made in Greek states to pool together their resources to face the external aggressions. Confederacy so formed came to be known as Delian League. During classical period democratic political structures got strengthened with the formation of Deme. Extensive use of slave labour in various sectors of production was one of the unique features of Greek history during the classical period. We also provided a brief account of the development of philosophical thought in particular contributions of Herodotus, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. The end of the classical period of Greek history has been discussed in the last section of the Unit.

12.6 EXERCISES

- 1) Give a brief account of the early Greek Civilizations.
- 2) Write 100 words each on:
 - (i) Iliad and Odyssey
 - (ii) Linear 'B' script
- 3) Discuss in brief the nature of conflict of aristocracy with peasantry and how it culminated in the establishment of democracy.
- 4) Write brief notes on:
 - (i) Delian League
 - (ii) Deme
- 5) What were the main features of the institution of slavery in ancient Greece?
- 6) Write in 100 words the ideas of ancient Greek philosophers.